

## University of South Carolina Scholar Commons

---

Robert Burns and Friends

Robert Burns Collections

---

1-1-2012

# “Epistolary Performances”: Burns and the arts of the letter

Kenneth Simpson

---

### Publication Info

2012, pages 58-67.

© The Contributors, 2012 All rights reserved Printed and distributed by CreateSpace <https://wwwcreatespace.com/900002089>

Editorial contact address: Patrick Scott, c/o Irvin Department of Rare Books & Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries, 1322 Greene Street, Columbia, SC 29208, U.S.A. ISBN 978-1-4392-7097-4

Scott, P., Simpson, K., eds. (2012). Robert Burns & Friends essays by W. Ormiston Roy Fellows presented to G. Ross Roy. P. Scott & K. Simpson (Eds.). Columbia, SC: Scottish Literature Series, 2012.

This Chapter is brought to you by the Robert Burns Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Burns and Friends by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## **“Epistolary Performances”: Burns and the arts of the letter<sup>1</sup>**

*Kenneth Simpson*

Scholarship increasingly identifies Burns as a multi-voiced poet, a sophisticated literary artist, and a complex human being. His letters repay scrutiny in terms of the various qualities they reveal: the reflection of the wide range of Burns’s reading, his remarkable powers of recall, and his capacity for mimicry; the diversity of voices and styles employed, indicating a considerable dramatic talent; the narrative verve and mastery of rhetoric that mark him out as the novelist *manqué*; and the psychological implications, in that the chameleon capacity of Burns the writer exacerbates the problems of identity of Burns the man.

Many of Burns’s letters are carefully crafted; they are artefacts, works of conscious artistry as much as the poems are. Even in times of stress, as in the breach with the Armour family, he writes as conscious, sometimes self-conscious, craftsman with quotes ready to hand, including from himself (Roy I:45, 47).<sup>2</sup> Burns’s letters substantiate the assertion of Dr Johnson in his *Life of Pope*: “There is indeed

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgement is due to the British Academy and the Department of English Studies, University of Strathclyde, for supporting initial research on this project and travel to the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society conference at the College of Charleston, South Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter in this essay, references in the text to G. Ross Roy, ed. *Letters of Robert Burns* (1985) are given as volume number and page number only.

no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse.”<sup>3</sup>

In many letters Burns writes for effect, often projecting self-images, as in the letter to Sir John Whitefoord of 1 December 1786, two days after his first arrival in Edinburgh, where he identifies himself as a “bard of Nature’s making” (I: 68). Often he writes ironically rather than literally, or, by his own testimony, he performs. To Lady Henrietta Don he wrote,

I have here sent you a parcel of my epistolary performances.... I might have altered or omitted somethings in these letters; perhaps I ought to have done so; but I wished to show you the Bard and his style in their native colors (I:103-4).

Burns’s readiness to be recruited as Caledonia’s Bard fostered further an innate tendency to role-playing. Consequently, just as Holy Willie does not represent the viewpoint of his creator, one must beware of citation of every letter as evidence of Burns’s speaking *in propria persona*. His response to a line in James Crie’s *Address to Loch Lomond*—“Truth/ The soul of every song that’s nobly great”—was to thunder, “Fiction is the soul of many a Song that’s nobly great” (I:326); likewise some of his letters.

Plainly Burns relished the craft of letter-writing and, as he testified to Dr Moore (I:141), he made copies of those with which he was especially pleased. Some letters were clearly intended for publication: for instance, the letter of 7 February 1787, responding to the unsought advice of the Earl of Buchan, exists in several manuscript versions and was published in *The Bee*, 27 April 1791 (I 90-92). The course of the eighteenth century had provided significant precedents. Albeit with their author’s reluctance, Swift’s letters had begun to appear in print from 1740, and the first of Smollett’s were published in 1769, but the example that Burns may also have followed was that of Pope, who in 1736 himself began preparation of an edition of his letters. Those letters transcribed in the Glenriddell Manuscript may well represent the nucleus of the edition that, had he lived longer,

---

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), II:298-9.

Burns would have presented to the world. To Mrs Dunlop he wrote of what he had prepared for Robert Riddell of Glenriddell: "I have lately collected, for a Friend's perusal, all my letters; I mean, those which I first sketched in a rough draught, & afterwards wrote out fair" (II:270). Finding only one of his letters to her, he offers this explanation: "I wrote always to you, the rhapsody of the moment" (II:270). Likewise to Peter Hill he acknowledges, "writing to you was always the ready business of my heart" (II:292). An attempt is being made to placate those who will see themselves as under-represented.

Burns's letters reflect the breadth and depth of his reading, garnered by the "retentive memory" for which he was, he told Moore, "a good deal noted" (I:135). John Murdoch's use of the second (1767) edition of Arthur Masson's *Collection of English Prose and Verse* provided a range of literary models (Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, among others), as did the *Spectator* essays. Echoes of, for instance, "To Leonora" can be heard in letters to recipients as diverse as William Niven, Burns's father, and 'Clarinda' (I:5, 6, and 183-4). Murdoch's teaching emphasised rhetoric, which Burns first put into practice in adolescent debates with Niven and Thomas Orr and continued in their correspondence. Early letters to Alison Begbie [?] have a formality of manner at odds with the sentiments which he wishes to convey: having stressed that the one rule he will invariably keep with her is "honestly to tell you the plain truth," he adds, "There is something so mean and unmanly in the arts of dissimulation and falsehood, that I am surprised they can be acted by any one in so noble, so generous a passion as virtuous love" (I:12). The modesty topos is used to great effect to correspondents ranging from Alison Begbie [?] to this to Mrs Dunlop: "I am a miserable hand at your fine speeches; and if my gratitude is to be reckoned by my expression I shall come poorly off in the account" (I:369); and, in a letter to Margaret Chalmers which has begun "I hate dissimulation in the language of the heart," he goes on to claim, "My rhetoric seems quite to have lost its effect on the lovely half of mankind" (I:165).

The letters serve as an index to, and timetable of, Burns's reading. When he writes to Robert Muir, 20 March 1786, "I

intend we shall have a gill between us, in a Mutchkin-stoup" (I: 29), there is a clear evocation of these lines from Allan Ramsay's "Lucky Spence's Last Advice": "gie us in anither gill,/ A mutchken, Jo, let's tak our fill." Confirmation comes in a letter of 3 April when he quotes from "the famous Ramsay of jingling memory" (I:30). Similarly, references to his personal relationship with his muse (e.g. "my muse jilted me here, and turned a corner on me, and I have not got again into her good graces," I:112) may have been prompted by the example of Robert Fergusson in "The King's Birthday in Edinburgh," where the poet's muse, in addition to an incapacity for whisky, proves irrelevant to the occasion.

It is the legacy of Burns's reading of fiction that is especially evident. To Moore, Burns wrote, "I have gravely planned a Comparative view of You, Fielding, Richardson, & Smollet [*sic*] in your different qualities & merits as Novel-Writers' (II:37). From them he learned much. In their range and subtlety of technique the letters bespeak a potential novelist of real quality, many of them exuding imaginative energy and narrative drive. There is an exuberant anecdote of John Richmond's staid landlady, Mrs. Carfrae, with whom Burns lodged initially in Edinburgh, and the "Daughters of Belial" who lived above (I:83), and Burns's vivid account of the horse-race with the Highlander down Loch Lomond side, possibly inspired by Dr Slop's fall in *Tristram Shandy*, volume II, ch. 9, exemplifies the collusion of style, syntax, and sense (I: 125). The "incomparable humor" (I:296) which Burns so admired in Smollett prompts a caricature of Miss Nancy Sherriff (I:119) almost certainly inspired by the description of Lieutenant Lismahago in *Humphry Clinker* in Jerry Melford's letter of 10 July. Totally at odds with the egalitarianism for which Burns is celebrated is this voice which is remarkably redolent of the same novel's Matt Bramble: "I have ever looked on Mankind in the lump to be nothing better than a foolish, headstrong, credulous, unthinking Mob; and their universal belief has ever had extremely little weight with me" (I:349). Surely it was Parson Adams in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* who inspired this: "I have such an aversion to right line and method, that when I can't get over the hedges that bound the highway, I zig-zag across the road" (I:131), and Fielding is also the model for

the mock-heroic in which Burns excels (e.g. to Stephen Clarke, II: 141-2; and to William Nicol, II:183-4). There are so many echoes of *Tom Jones* in the letter to Miss Wilhelmina Alexander enclosing "The Bonnie Lass of Ballochmyle" that Burns was surely relishing his skill in the mode, proving his claim at the outset, "Poets are such outré Beings, so much the children of wayward Fancy and capricious Whim, that I believe the world generally allows them a larger latitude in the rules of Propriety, than the sober Sons of Judgment & Prudence" (I:63). Though the lady did not respond, it seems that she later came to cherish the letter. Tom Jones's behaviour as sentimental lover, reading Sophia's letter a thousand times, probably inspired this: "Schetki has sent me the song, set to a fine air of his composing. I have called the song Clarinda: I have carried it about in my pocket and thumbed it over all day' (I:221). Truly striking is the extent to which Burns models not just his writing but his behaviour on his reading.

As Carol McGuirk has demonstrated, Burns was no stranger to the concept or the practice of sentimental encounter.<sup>4</sup> Even in the earliest letters feeling is an index to virtue. At the age of twenty-one, Burns writes to Niven, "I shall be happy to hear from you how you go on in the ways of life; I do not mean so much how trade prospers ... as how you go on in the cultivation of the finer feelings of the heart" (I:5). Alison Begbie is told how the thought of her affects him: "I grasp every creature in the arms of universal benevolence, and equally participate in the pleasures of the happy, and sympathise with the miseries of the unfortunate" (I:9). Several letters typify the self-approving joy of the benevolist; this, for instance, to Clarinda: "The dignified and dignifying consciousness of an honest man, and the well-grounded trust in approving Heaven, are two most substantial [foundations] of happiness" (I:253). Like "To a Louse," letters testify to the influence of Adam Smith and particularly the concept of "the spectator in the breast," which plainly struck a chord with Burns's fissile personality: Burns is revealed as both actor and judge. A letter to

---

<sup>4</sup> Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

Clarinda reproduces an internal dialogue, in effect a lengthy soliloquy laden with quotations (I:210). The letter to the Duke of Queensberry enclosing *The Whistle* dramatises a debate with himself (II:109-10), and it is reprised in the Glenriddell Manuscript. Wild apostrophising to Clarinda elicits the self-admonition, "But to leave these paths that lead to madness" (II:189). Pronoun shifts between first- and third-person recur; and in the Clarinda correspondence he alternates freely between 'I' and 'Sylvander'. Psychologically revealing also are the letters alluding to his decision to take Jean as his wife to Ellisland in that they play upon the terms of trial, jury, and verdict.

Models of sensibility were to be found in the novels that were his "bosom favorites" (I:141), *Tristram Shandy* and *The Man of Feeling*. There are various echoes of Mackenzie, later designated his sole "favorite Author" (II:269). "You know I am a Physiognomist" (I:6), he reminds Niven; much is made in Mackenzie's novel of skill in physiognomy. Mackenzie's fragmented narrative is "a bundle of little episodes;"<sup>5</sup> Burns sends John Ballantine "a parcel of pieces whose fate is undetermined" (I:31). In a note in the Glenriddell Manuscript, Burns disclaims responsibility for errors, calling to mind Mackenzie's editor who blames the curate for the nature of the text.

Sterne's influence is everywhere. Burns as self-conscious narrator owes much to Tristram. "A damned Star has almost all my life usurped my zenith," he tells Peter Stuart, editor of the *Morning Star*, in a line that is undiluted Shandy (I: 408). How should one respond to the hostility of Providence? Burns's answer would often seem to be with a typically Sternean anti-rationalism. In his statement of his 'creed' to Mrs Dunlop he contrasts "the cold theorems of Reason" with "a few honest Prejudices & benevolent Prepossessions" (I: 419). When Burns writes, "Offences proceed only from the heart" (I:436), he is quoting Tristram's Uncle Toby.

It seems virtually certain that Burns was familiar with at least some of Sterne's letters. *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (10 letters to Mrs. Draper) appeared in 1773 and were

---

<sup>5</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 5.

reprinted in 1775; his daughter, Lydia Medalle, published 114 letters of Sterne with a memoir in 1775; and his *Works*, published 1780, included 126 of his letters. For long Sterne was accredited—erroneously—with the first instance of the use of the word ‘sentimental’ on the basis of this passage (the letter is to Elizabeth Lumley, later his wife):

I gave a thousand pensive, penetrating looks at the chair thou hadst so often graced, in those quiet and sentimental repasts—then laid down my knife, and fork, and took out my handkerchief, and clapped it across my face, and wept like a child.<sup>6</sup>

Here is Burns to Margaret Chalmers:

I never saw two, whose esteem flattered the nobler feelings of my soul ... so much as Lady McKenzie and Miss Chalmers. When I think of you—hearts the best, minds the noblest, of human kind—unfortunate, even in the shades of life— when I think I have met with you, and have lived more of real life with you in eight days, than I can do with almost any body I meet with in eight years—when I think on the improbability of meeting you in this world again—I could sit down and cry like a child! (I:317).

Burns is both actor and spectator. Noting “the reckless grace of his letters to women,” and adding that “Such letters were intended to be shown about,” Lewis P. Curtis remarks of Sterne, “He was preoccupied with the absorbing drama of his own existence.”<sup>7</sup> Exactly the same might be said of Burns. He is emphatically a man of his age. Martin Price comments that “Sterne is full of an ironic awareness of the excesses of sentiment even as he prizes it; and, like Boswell, he tends both to feel deeply and to study himself while feeling, always aware of the conflict and exploiting its incongruity.”<sup>8</sup> Only the last clause needs slight qualification: Burns’s experiencing of the incongruity is perhaps more private than public. The self-projections and self-analysis evoke both Sterne’s Yorick and the Rousseau of the *Confessions*. Rousseau writes, “I will...continue faithfully to set forth what

---

<sup>6</sup> *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis P. Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters*, ed. Curtis, xxvii.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Price, *The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 741.



Jean Jacques Rousseau was, did, and thought.”<sup>9</sup> Burns informs Moore, “I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF” (I:133); and his opening gambit to Archibald Lawrie is “Here I am – that is all I can tell you of that unaccountable BEING – Myself” (I:147).

As with poems such as “Ode, Sacred to the Memory of Mrs Oswald of Auchincruive” and his epigrams on the Earl of Galloway, some of Burns’s letters fulfil a cathartic function. To Mrs Dunlop he writes, “Well, I hope writing to *you* will ease a little my troubled soul” (II:45). To Ainslie he exclaims, “I am d-mnably out of humour ... & that is the reason why I take up the pen to *you*: ‘tis the nearest way, (probatum est) to recover my spirits again” (II:211-2). With the news that Jean has borne him twins, he asks Richmond to wish him luck and sends him “Green grow the rashes, O” (I:51). Alongside the element of bravado is the sense that writing offers not only an alternative world but even the potential to write one’s way out of the problems of the real world. To Muir, Burns affirms, “But an honest man has nothing to fear ... a man, conscious of having acted an honest part among his fellow creatures; even granting that he may have been the sport, at times, of passions and instincts” (I:258); and it is evident that he is writing principally to reassure himself. Similarly, he writes to Rev. William Greenfield “in the Confessor style, to disburthen my conscience” (I:74). From early in his correspondence Burns’s friends such as Richmond are enjoined to respond so that he can reply with “letters as long as my arm” (I:28). Paradoxically, correspondence is a means of fixing things, a constant to offer as counter to his chameleon qualities; so, too, the repetition of phrases and sentences, as in the accounts of the conduct of the Armours (I:41, 42, 44) or taking on Ellisland and the excise to support his mother and siblings (I:224, 239, 314, 351, 357), serves as an attempt to fashion a definitive version of his conduct. This applies equally to the formulaic repetition of his reasons for marrying Jean Armour in letters spanning almost a year, April 1788 to February 1789.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Price, p. 759.

Burns, who referred in one letter to his “fugitive Pieces” (I:340), is trying to reconcile the flux of experience and the need for stability or fixity; and he is confronted by paradox. He assures Margaret Chalmers, “I have no formed design in all this, but just in the nakedness of my heart write you down a meer [sic] matter-of-fact story” (I:82), and one is left wondering if he recognised the oxymoron. In a letter to Mrs Dunlop in which he stresses the importance of spontaneity and originality, he acknowledges, “I have often thought of keeping a letter, *in progression*, by me” (I:295): experience and inscription are to run in tandem. Begun 3 March 1794 and resumed nineteen days later, a letter to Cunningham carries the admission, “In fact, I am writing you a Journal, & not a letter” (II:286). Several letters, exemplified by the following, actually begin *in medias res*: “Do not blame me for it, Madam” (II:142); “No! I will not attempt an apology” (II:145). The Shandean influence is apparent in what is virtually a prototype of stream-of-consciousness narration.

Writ large in Scottish literature from the eighteenth century on is the idea that identity—sometimes both personal and national—is to be found in the act of writing. Identity is text. Text fuses stability and flux. Witness Coleridge on Scott, in whose work he identified “the contest between the two great moving principles of humanity: religious adherence to the past ... the desire and the admiration of permanence ... and the passion for increase of knowledge, for truth as the offspring of reason—in short, the mighty instincts of progression and free agency.”<sup>10</sup> How telling that in *Redgauntlet* Darsie Latimer, scion of men of action, finds identity in “the rage of narration.”<sup>11</sup> Likewise Boswell pleads in a letter to Temple, “Let me have it to tell.”<sup>12</sup> Here the relics of the bardic function merge with the psychological imperatives of the writer. For Burns, literature offers a hyper-reality: he tells William Dunbar, “I often take up a

---

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Epistolaria*, ed. Arthur Turnbull et al. (London: George Bell, 1911), II: 181.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press [World's Classics], 1985), p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> *Letters of James Boswell to the Rev W.J. Temple* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1908), p. 275.

Volume of my Spenser to realize you to my imagination, and think over the social scenes we have had together" (II:5).

Burns's metaphors reflect the polarities that he would reconcile. His career is regularly a "vortex" (I:379, 393, 426; II: 51) and his is "a meteor appearance" (I:107). At the same time he alludes to his fathering poems (I:164), and references to family and poems are often conjunct. Mrs Dunlop is informed, "I look on your little Namesake [Francis Wallace Burns] to be my chef d'oeuvre in that species of manufacture, as I look on "Tam o' Shanter" to be my standard performance in the Poetical line" (II:83). Creative and procreative 'performance' are to function in tandem: he fathers poems and songs by Nancy McLehose and a son by her maid, Jenny Clow.

Yet, from as early as September 1786, Burns recognised the dichotomy of 'the Man' and 'the Bard' (I:56). The man who represented himself as, variously, "the Ayrshire Bard," "the rustic Bard," and the Bard of "old Scotia" (I:71, 77, and 97) is, ultimately, the bard of the modern multiple self. As depression increasingly took its hold, the later letters highlight the price Burns paid for his chameleon talents. To Alexander Cunningham he begins a letter of 25 February 1794 with an emended line from *Macbeth*, V, iii, "Canst thou minister to a mind diseased?" (II:282); and what follows is the letter in which he offers his extended thoughts on religion. His awareness of internal division is evident from a range of letters spanning his last nine years: in December 1787, "My worst enemy is *Moimême*" (I:185); "My nerves are in a damnable state.... This Farm [Ellisland] has undone my enjoyment of myself" (II:3); and—most telling of all—this to Erskine of Mar, 13 April 1793:

when you have honored this letter with a perusal, please commit it to the flames. BURNS ... I have here, in his native colours, drawn *as he is*; but should any of the people in whose hands is the very bread he eats, get the least knowledge of the picture, it would ruin the poor Bard forever (II:210).